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SEXUAL INDIFFERENCE AND LESBIAN REPRESENTATION

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THERE IS A SENSE IN WHICH LESBIAN IDENTITY could be assumed, spoken and articulated conceptually as political through feminism – and, current debates to wit, *against* feminism; in particular through and against the feminist critique of the Western discourse on love and sexuality, and therefore, to begin with, the rereading of psychoanalysis as a theory of sexuality and sexual difference. If the first feminist emphasis on sexual difference as gender (woman's difference from man) has rightly come under attack for obscuring the effects of other differences in women's psychosocial oppression, nevertheless that emphasis on sexual difference did open up a critical space – a conceptual, representational and erotic space – in which women could address themselves to women. And in the very act of assuming and speaking from the position of subject, a woman could concurrently recognize women as subjects *and* as objects of female desire.

It is in such a space, hard-won and daily threatened by social disapprobation, censure and denial, a space of contradiction requiring constant reaffirmation and painful renegotiation, that the very notion of sexual difference could then be put into question, and its limitations be assessed, both *vis-à-vis* the claims of other, not strictly sexual, differences, and with regard to sexuality itself. It thus appears that 'sexual difference' is the term of a conceptual paradox corresponding to what is in effect a real contradiction in women's lives: the term, at once, of a sexual *difference* (women are, or want, something different from men) and of a sexual *indifference* (women are, or want, the same as men). [...]

The psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality, wrote Luce Irigaray in 1975, outlining the terms of what here I will call sexual (in)difference, tells 'that

the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual' (Irigaray, 1985a:28). Within the conceptual frame of that *sexual indifference*, female desire for the self-same, an other female self, cannot be recognized. [...] Consequently, Irigaray writes, Freud was at a loss with his homosexual female patients, and his analyses of them were really about male homosexuality. 'The object choice of the homosexual woman is [understood to be] determined by a *masculine* desire and tropism' – that is, precisely, the turn of so-called sexual difference into sexual indifference, a single practice and representation of the sexual.

So there will be no female homosexuality, just a hommo-sexuality in which woman will be involved in the process of specularizing the phallus, begged to maintain the desire for the same that man has, and will ensure at the same time, elsewhere and in complementary and contradictory fashion, the perpetuation in the couple of the pole of 'matter'.
(1985b [1974]:101-3)

With the term *hommo-sexuality* [*hommo-sexualité*] – at times also written *hom(m)osexuality* [*hom(m)osexualité*] – Irigaray puns on the French word for man, *homme*, from the Latin *homo* (meaning 'man'), and the Greek *homo* (meaning 'same'). In taking up her distinction between homosexuality (or homo-sexuality) and 'hommo-sexuality' (or 'hom(m)osexuality'), I want to remark the conceptual distance between the former term, homosexuality, by which I mean lesbian (or gay) sexuality, and the diacritically marked hommosexuality, which is the term of sexual indifference, the term (in fact) of heterosexuality; I want to re-mark both the incommensurable distance between them and the conceptual ambiguity that is conveyed by the two almost identical acoustic images. [...]

Lesbian representation, or rather, its condition of possibility, depends on separating out the two contrary undertows that constitute the paradox of sexual (in)difference, on isolating but maintaining the two senses of homosexuality and hommo-sexuality. Thus the critical effort to dislodge the erotic from the discourse of gender, with its indissoluble knot of sexuality and reproduction, is concurrent and interdependent with a rethinking of what, in most cultural discourses and sociosexual practices, is still, nevertheless, a gendered sexuality. [...]

Lesbian representation and spectatorship

The question of address, of who produce cultural representations and for whom (in any medium, genre or semiotic system, from writing to performance), and of who receives them and in what contexts, has been a major concern of feminism and other

critical theories of cultural marginality. In the visual arts, that concern has focused on the notion of spectatorship, which has been central to the feminist critique of representation and the production of different images of difference, for example in women's cinema.¹ Recent work in both film and performance theory has been elaborating the film-theoretical notion of spectatorship with regard to what may be the specific relations of homosexual subjectivity, in several directions. Elizabeth Ellsworth, for one, surveying the reception of *Personal Best* (1982), a commercial man-made film about a lesbian relationship between athletes, found that lesbian feminist reviews of the film adopted interpretative strategies which rejected or altered the meaning carried by conventional (Hollywood) codes of narrative

representation. [...]

While recognizing limits to this 'oppositional appropriation' of dominant representation, Ellsworth argues that the struggle over interpretation is a constitutive process for marginal subjectivities, as well as an important form of resistance. But when the marginal community is directly addressed, in the context of out-lesbian performance such as the WOW Cafe or the Split Britches productions, the appropriation seems to have no limits, to be directly 'subversive', to yield not merely a site of interpretive work and resistance but a representation that requires no interpretive effort and is immediately, univocally legible, signalling 'the creation of new imagery, new metaphors, and new conventions that can be read, or given new meaning, by a very specific spectator' (Davy, 1986:49).

The assumption behind this view, as stated by Kate Davy, is that such lesbian performance 'undercut[s] the heterosexual model by implying a spectator that is not the generic, universal male, not the cultural construction "woman", but lesbian—a subject defined in terms of sexual similarity[...] whose desire lies outside the fundamental model or underpinnings of sexual difference' (ibid.: 47). Somehow, this seems too easy a solution to the problem of spectatorship, and even less convincing as a representation of 'lesbian desire'. For, if sexual similarity could so unproblematically replace sexual difference, why would the new lesbian theatre need to insist on gender, if only as 'the residue of sexual difference' that is, as Davy herself insists, worn in the 'stance, gesture, movement, mannerisms, voice, and dress' (ibid.: 48) of the butch-femme play? Why would lesbian camp be taken up in theatrical performance, as Case suggests, to recuperate that space of seduction which historically has been the lesbian bar, and the Left Bank salon before it—spaces of daily-life performance, masquerade, cross-dressing and practices constitutive of both community and subjectivity?

In an essay on 'The Dynamics of Desire' in performance and pornography, Jill Dolan asserts that the reappropriation of pornography in lesbian magazines ('a visual space meant at least theoretically to be free of male subordination') offers 'liberative fantasies' and 'representations of one kind of sexuality based in lesbian desire', adding that the 'male forms' of pornographic representation 'acquire new meanings when they are used to communicate desire for readers of a different gender and

sexual orientation' (1987:171). Again, as in Davy, the question of lesbian desire is begged; and again the ways in which the new context would produce new meanings or 'disrupt traditional meanings' (ibid.: 173) appear to be dependent on the presumption of a unified lesbian viewer/reader, gifted with undivided and noncontradictory subjectivity, and every bit as generalized and universal as the female spectator both Dolan and Davy impute (and rightly so) to the antipornography feminist performance art. For, if all lesbians had one and the same definition of

'lesbian desire', there would hardly be any debate among us, or any struggle over interpretations of cultural images, especially the ones we produce. [...]

The difficulty in defining an autonomous form of female sexuality and desire in the wake of a cultural tradition still grounded in sexual (in)difference, still caught in the tropism of homo-sexuality, is not to be overlooked or wilfully bypassed. It is perhaps even greater than the difficulty in devising strategies of representation which will, in turn, alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of *what can be seen*. [...]

Consider Marilyn Frye's suggestive Brechtian parable about our culture's conceptual reality ('phallocratic reality') as a conventional stage play, where the actors – those committed to the performance/maintenance of the Play, 'the phallocratic loyalists' – visibly occupy the foreground, while stagehands – who provide the necessary labour and framework for the material (re)production of the Play – remain invisible in the background. What happens, she speculates, when the stagehands (women, feminists) begin thinking of themselves as actors and try to participate visibly in the performance, attracting attention to their activities and their own role in the play? The loyalists cannot conceive that anyone in the audience may see or focus their attention on the stagehands' projects in the background, and thus become 'disloyal' to the Play, or, as Adrienne Rich has put it, 'disloyal to civilization' (Rich, 1983:166–73; Frye, 1979:275–310). Well, Frye suggests, there are some people in the audience who do see what the conceptual system of heterosexuality, the Play's performance, attempts to keep invisible. These are lesbian people, who can see it because their own reality is not represented or even surmised in the Play, and who therefore reorient their attention toward the background, the spaces, activities, and figures of women elided by the performance. But 'attention is a kind of passion' that 'fixes and directs the application of one's physical and emotional work':

If the lesbian sees the women, the woman may see the lesbian seeing her. Within this, there is a flowering of possibilities. The woman, feeling herself seen, may learn that she *can be seen*; she may also be able to know that a woman can see, that is, can author perception...The lesbian's seeing undercuts the mechanism by which the production and constant reproduction of heterosexuality for woman was to be rendered *automatic*.
(Frye, 1983:172)

And this is where we are now, as the critical reconsideration of lesbian history past and present is doing for feminist theory what Pirandello, Brecht and others did for the bourgeois theatre conventions, and avant-garde film-makers have done for Hollywood cinema; the latter, however, have not just disappeared, much as one would wish they had. So, too, have the conventions of seeing, and the relations of desire and meaning in spectatorship, remained partially anchored or contained by a

frame of visibility that is still heterosexual, or hommo-sexual, and just as persistently colour blind. [...]

So what *can* be seen? Even in feminist film theory, the current 'impasse regarding female spectatorship is related to the blind spot of lesbianism', Patricia White suggests in her reading of Ulrike Ottinger's film *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1977) (White, 1987:82). That film, she argues, on the contrary, displaces the assumption 'that feminism finds its audience "naturally"' (ibid.: 95); it does so by addressing the female spectator through specific scenarios and 'figures of spectatorial desire' and 'trans-sex identification', through figures of transvestism and masquerade. And the position the film thus constructs for its spectator is not one of essential femininity or impossible masculinization (as proposed in Doane, 1982:74-87, and Mulvey, 1981:13-15) but rather a position of marginality or 'deviance' *vis-à-vis* the normative heterosexual frame of vision (see also Case, 1989).

Once again, what *can* be seen? 'When I go into a store, people see a black person and only incidentally a woman,' writes Jewelle Gomez, a writer of science fiction and author of at least one vampire story about a black lesbian blues singer names Gilda, [...] 'I can pass as straight, if by some bizarre turn of events I should want to[...]but I cannot pass as white in this society' (1986:939). Clearly, the very issue of passing, across any boundary of social division, is related quite closely to the frame of vision and the conditions of representation.

'Passing demands quiet. And from that quiet – silence', writes Michelle Cliff (1985:22). It is 'a dual masquerade – passing straight/passing lesbian [that] enervates and contributes to speechlessness – to speak might be to reveal' (Cliff, 1978:7).

However, and paradoxically again, speechlessness can only be overcome, and her 'journey into speech' begin, by 'claiming an identity they taught me to despise'; that is, by passing black 'against a history of forced fluency', a history of passing white (Cliff, 1985:11-17, 40-7). The dual masquerade, her writing suggests, is at once the condition of speechlessness and of overcoming speechlessness, for the latter occurs by recognizing and representing the division in the self, the difference and the displacement from which any identity that needs to be claimed derives, and hence can be claimed only, in Lorde's words, as 'the very house of difference' (1982). [...]

The discourses, demands and counter-demands that inform lesbian identity and representation in the 1980s[...]include, most notably, the political concepts of oppression and agency developed in the struggles of social movements such as the women's movement, the gay liberation movement and Third-World feminism, as well as an awareness of the importance of developing a theory of sexuality that takes into

account the working of unconscious processes in the construction of female subjectivity. But as I have tried to argue, the discourses, demands and counterdemands that inform lesbian representation are still unwittingly caught in the

paradox of socio-sexual (in)difference, often unable to think homosexuality and homo-sexuality at once separately and together. Even today, in most representational contexts, [the femme lesbian] would be either passing lesbian or passing straight, her (homo)sexuality being in the last instance what can not be seen. Unless, as Newton and others suggest, she enter the frame of vision *as or with* a lesbian in male body drag (1984:575).

Note

1 See, for example, Mayne, 1984:49-66; B.R.Rich, 1984:100-30; and de Lauretis, 1987:127-48.